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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of special class placement was studied in 33 emotionally disturbed children (ages 8 to 19 years) attending an outpatient psychiatric clinic. It was found, among other things, that there was a positive relationship between success in a special class, and socioeconomic status, intactness of family, and absence of pychopathology in siblings. It was also found that the earlier the S was placed in a special class, the better chance he or she had for improvement, both academically and emotionally. Ss whose parents were receiving treatment for psychological problems also tended to fare better in special classes than those whose parents were not in therapy. A final contributing element in appraising the efficacy of the special classes was the Ss' evaluation and perception of the learning environment: progress in learning was shown to be correlated with feelings of acceptance of the learning environment. (DLS)

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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION CLASSES: A FOLLOW UP STUDY IN A COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH CENTER

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The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of special class placement in a group of children from a child outpatient psychiatric clinic in an urban eastern city.

The present investigators were interested in studying the efficacy of special class placement for children with multiple diagnostic categories who were referred from a clinical setting. Variables investigated included intactness of family, S.E.S level, parents educational level as well as incidence of psychopathology of parents and siblings.

Measures used in evaluation of progress were parent and child questionnaires aa well as results from pre and post testing of cognitive, educational, perceptual and emotional variables as measured by the WISC-R, Bender Gestalt, D-A-P and reading achievement scores. The authors were particularly interested in finding whether the parents' perception of their child's progress, the subjects, self-perception of their progress and the objective data found by the post-testing were concordant.

Population: All children who were referred from Maimonides Children's Mental Health Outpatient Department facility, Brooklyn, New York, to special education classes, including private as well as public educational facilities were included in the original study. The cut-off date for inclusion of the 100 children referred was August, 1976. Forty-one responded to a preliminary questionnaire and 33 actually participated in the study (27 boys and 6 girls).

The ages ranged from 8 - 19 years with a mean age level of 12.4. Subjects came from low to lower middle SES levels as indicated by parents' present income levels.

Subjects original intellectual functioning as measured by WISC scores, ranged from FSIQ 56 - 122, with a mean of 85.

Ethnic background of subjects was composed of:-

Hispanic	13
Italian	10
Jewish	7
Mixed	2
Irish	1
Total	33

Information was gathered on 19 variables including age, sex, clinical status, medication, type of class, ethnicity, bilingual background, religion, number of siblings, socio-economic level, working parents, intactness of family, families psychopathology including parents and siblings, parents educational level. Parents and children's responses to questionnaires evaluating the effect of the special class were also included.

33 subjects included in the study were re-evaluated by psychologists not associated with the Community Mental Health Center. The subjects were administered the WISC-R, WRAT, Bender Gestalt, D-A-P and Gilmore Oral Reading Test. In addition, a verbal questionnaire as to the efficacy of their present placement was given to each subject and parent.

Analysis of the Data

To analyze the data, frequency distributions were first computed on sex, type of class, ethnicity, SES level, intactness of family, familial factors related to psychopathology, clinical status, parents educational level, length of stay in special class, responses to parents and children's questionnaires.

To examine the relationship between the above categorical variables and the children's emotional and academic growth as measured by the post test battery, various analyses of covariance were computed. When length of stay was used as the covariate, it showed no relationship with overall academic progress. Rather, familial and sociological factors appear to contribute more to the academic and emotional growth of the children in this sample. On these analysis, the covariates used were the pre-test data or the corresponding test analyzed.

For instance, on measures of academic achievement, as indicated by the scores on the Wide Range Achievement Test and the Gilmore Oral Reading Test, there appears to be a positive relationship between gains on both measures with SES levels, intactness of family and absence of psychopathology in siblings. This positive relationship showed stronger support for the WRAT than for the Gilmore Oral Reading test for SES levels.

On measures of emotional and perceptual growth, as indicated by the Bender Gestalt test and the D-A-P test, results suggest that a positive relationship exists between intactness

of family and these two measures. For the Bender Gestalt test using the pre-test as the covariate, the test data indicates a rather strong relationship. SES level and absence of psychopathology in siblings did not have a relationship to this measure however.

The absence of psychopathology in siblings as a contributing variable to academic growth is one of the most interesting findings in this study.

Furthermore, children whose parents were receiving treatment for psychological problems also tended to fair better in special classes, as compared to children whose parents were not in therapy.

Seventeen subjects, whose parents were in treatment made a six months higher mean gain on the academic indicator as compared to the 16 subjects whose parents were not in treatment. This analysis was computed holding length of stay in special class constant for both groups.

In order to study the effects of age on test results, two groups were dichotomized with a cut-off point established at fourteen years. Overall, the younger group obtained higher scores than the older youngsters on the post-test sessions though they started out with lower scores when placed in special class. For instance, on the WRAT, the younger group made a mean gain of 3.7 years in contrast with the older group's mean gain of 1.95 years.

When comparing the child's evaluation of his special class to emotional growth, as measured by D-A-P, there was a strong relationship suggesting that the children who perceived their

placement as positive, tend to exhibit healthier self-concepts.

When analysis is made between the parents and children's responses to the efficacy of special class, a 50% agreement is found between positive evaluations given by both groups. 33% of the children rated their experience in special class as negative or neutral while their parents regarded it as positive. A social desirability factor in the parents' responses towards the clinical setting perhaps accounts for this discrepancy. At the same time, parents whose children have been placed in special class tend to get less negative feedback from the special class teachers and therefore feel relieved and more positive towards the school, and towards their children.

Conclusions

The preliminary findings of this study clearly point to the importance of socio-environmental factors and structures surrounding the child's life. Though the educational setting is one of these variables, other crucial parameters seem to exert influence over the child's progress in special class placement.

Familial factors and its complexities of variables interact strongly to affect the child's progress. This study highlights some trends in this direction; namely, the absence of psychopathology in siblings, the SES level and the intactness of the family.

These findings have repercussions in view of the fact that children of the poor constitute a large percentage of enrollment in special classes in this country.

It would appear that the cycle of poverty tends to create a cycle of failure which in turn is reinforced by educational institutions. This assertion is particularly valid in this study in which poverty level children (defined as those from Public Assistance families) did not perform as well academically as their counterparts from non-Public Assistance homes.

It also appears from this study that children who are in treatment and whose parents are also in therapy, tend to fair slightly better in academic progress and emotional growth suggesting treatment as an auxiliary agent. Psychotherapy, with all its possible interactional myriads, a most difficult intervention indeed to research, appears to contribute positively to special class children's self-concept as well as to their receptiveness to the total learning environment.

Age at placement is another interesting finding in this study. It was clearly demonstrated that the earlier the child is placed in special class, the better chances he may have for improvement both academically as well as emotionally. By contrast, the older child referred at a later age seems to encounter more complex hurdles. The implications of this finding would suggest that early diagnosis and clinical as well as educational interventions for handicapped children are highly recommended.

A final contributing element in appraising the efficacy of special education placement is the child's self-evaluation and perception of the learning environment he attends. Progress in

learning and feelings of acceptance of the environment in which learning takes place, are shown to be inter-related in this study. This supports an emergent philosophical view in American education which places central emphasis on humanistic interpersonal values in the educational process. Perhaps this would imply a system in which categorical labels could be abolished and segregation of children into confined settings be eliminated and a more flexible, open and integrative approach would locate the 'special child' into a "least restrictive environment", without segregated tracking.